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ABSTRACT

The English department at Central College (Pella, Iowa) has implemented a program that involves the entire faculty in the development of students' basic skills. The program's support system for students and faculty includes the following components: a skills laboratory staffed by a full-time skills coordinator and by trained student tutors selected by faculty members in all disciplines; inservice workshops to help faculty members develop students' basic skills in content-area courses; frequent written and oral communication with faculty members to obtain their suggestions for the program; and systematic record keeping to keep track of the skills development of each student. The entire faculty assumes responsibility in two ways for the development of students' basic skills: by structuring skills development into their courses and by insuring that all students reach a certain minimum level of competence before graduation. (GW)

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ALL HANDS ON DECK: INVOLVING THE ENTIRE FACULTY IN TEACHING BASIC SKILLS

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In balmy times, each person on a ship has a specific job: the helmsperson grips the helm, engineers tinker with the engines, cooks cook, stewards stew, and the English department teaches students to write. Only in an emergency, or what people perceive as an emergency, do we get all hands on deck.

Right now college administrators and teachers in all disciplines believe there is an emergency in students' command of reading, writing and oral communication, so they are more ready than they've been in years to haul themselves up on the deck and help out. That gives us English teachers our chance. Perhaps now we can implement what we've long been saying: English departments can't do this job alone; the entire institution should be involved in the development of basic skills in its students. So let's yell, "All hands on deck!" And once those deans, biologists and historians appear on the deck, let's offer them leadership, instruction and support. Toward that end I'd like to offer a few suggestions based upon an inclusive program I've helped

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launch at my own institution (a private, four-year liberal arts college of 1200 students), as well as upon my insights into the programs of other schools, as I have acted as consultant or led workshops on this topic.

GETTING STARTED

In beginning a program, the initiators should build the supporting scaffold first, and show everyone how strong it is, before asking them to help paint the skyscraper. At Central, a few English department faculty members began to construct our support system five years ago when they opened a non-credit writing lab, and initiated a course which trained upper-class students to tutor in the lab. Then they offered an eight-hour, in-service workshop which trained faculty from other disciplines to evaluate and develop student writing skills within a content-area course. From those two services has evolved our present support system, now directed by a full-time Skills Coordinator and an elected faculty Skills Council. In building our program, we have always tried to involve and train a wide spectrum of faculty, a step which I believe was the basis for our success, two years ago, in getting our faculty to vote for the second aspect of our skills program--formal responsibility. In both areas certain principles have emerged which may be helpful to a variety of other institutions.

BUILDING A SUPPORT SYSTEM

A system of broad faculty participation and accountability places on the playing field a large number of faculty and students who have not before been so closely engaged with teaching and learning basic skills across so broad a range of disciplines. The sympathetic swig of water, the stern pep-talk, the expert coaching and the efficient trauma center should be provided by a strong support system which helps both students and faculty as they struggle together to develop students' competence in reading, writing and oral communication.

For students who need special training, or who come limping from the field with their papers running red from every margin, a full complement of credit courses in all skills areas is indispensable, but so is a drop-in skills lab which provides immediate, free help. At Central the lab, staffed by a faculty director and trained upper-class student tutors, handles writing, reading and oral communication and also provides content-area tutors. Faculty in all disciplines are asked to help select these tutors--another way of keeping faculty involved in the lab. Many of the subject-area tutors and all of the skills tutors take a course entitled "Teaching Writing" or "Teaching Reading." Also, this year all subject-area tutors attended a three-day

workshop, funded by Exxon, to train them to be more helpful with students' reading, writing and study skills no matter what the content area.

Originally directed by regular English faculty who had a bit of released time for that responsibility, the lab this year is under the guidance of a full-time Skills Coordinator (a position funded by HEW under "Special Services for Economically Disadvantaged Students"). Such a direction is certainly desirable but once the home-built lab becomes a sophisticated facility, again the danger is that it will cease to connect with other faculty. Central has combatted that tendency by sluicing the lab into some empty spaces in a hallway of history, religion, philosophy and English faculty offices. So the Skills Coordinator shares the faculty's cares and coffeepot; lab tutors are surrounded by faculty available for advice and help, and the lab's waiting clients lean their jeans against the faculty's hallway walls. So the Skills Lab and the students it serves are not shoved off into a distant facility run by some what's-her-name whom faculty members never see. The consequence of our having moved the lab last year into this faculty enclave is an increase in numbers of students who use the lab, and a much greater faculty involvement in the lab.

Students come bloody from the field, but faculty fear to enter it, or fight unskillfully. They let it be known that they grade on content not on writing, or

they waste their energies stabbing at split infinitives and other now-legitimate villains of their own school days, or they rapier a hundred errors of various types and seriousness without helping the student to classify deficiencies and set priorities, or they chop at dialect characteristics in such a way as unnecessarily to wound the student's self-respect, or they allow to pass unchallenged a mechanically correct but mediocre writer who could benefit greatly from some pointers about paragraph coherence, parallelism, or variation of sentence patterns. They knowingly or unknowingly base students grades partly on facility of oral expression but they never offer the student an analysis of his communication style. Teachers ascribe poor essay test performance to laziness, writing deficiencies or lack of intelligence but fail to recognize and attack the reading comprehension problems whose telltale tracks appear in the blue book.

To remedy these weaknesses and to build faculty expertise and self-confidence, in-service workshops have for us been an effective aid. Over the past several years we have offered eight-hour seminars on developing student reading and writing skills in content-area courses. In addition, this past fall the annual three-day faculty workshop was devoted to helping faculty diagnose and develop student basic skills within content-area courses. For enhanced involvement, we have our own faculty teach these workshops, rather than outside consultants, so that

workshop leaders can later function as a continuing resource for their colleagues. For example, last year a colleague and I set up an exercise: he graded a group of essays from his Principles of Economics class, using all his skills to accurately diagnose writing problems and to give helpful feedback to students. Then I read the papers and gave him feedback about his comments to the students.

Besides sponsoring in-service workshops and acting as an ongoing resource, the leaders of the skills program need to be a continuing presence in every faculty person's life and mailbox. We send forms asking teachers to list students they think could benefit from the lab; we ask for teachers' recommendations on possible lab tutors; we call up Bill Hawkes for suggestions about how the lab could be more useful to his history students. In short, we try to be one of the squeakiest wheels on campus.

As well as directing the labs for students, and offering workshops, guidance and mailbox-stuffers for faculty, the Skills Council operates a broad system of record-keeping whose goal is to keep track of every student's development in writing, reading, and oral communication skills. Code numbers in each skills area are assigned to freshmen on the basis of their ACT scores, a written essay, the Nelson-Denny Reading Test,

and the student's self-evaluation.[1] Continuously updated by "skills" course teachers, lab staff, and advisors, a student's folder of skills information (of course available to the student) is used by advisors to counsel students about their academic goals and program, by departments as they evaluate the skills proficiency of their majors, and by lab staff as they seek to evaluate and help a drop-in.

MAKING THE ENTIRE FACULTY RESPONSIBLE FOR SKILLS

Thus supported, workshopped, nagged, and supplied with records, faculty should be encouraged to assume formal responsibility for the development of basic skills in their students. There are two ways: one approach makes the faculty members responsible for structuring skills development into their courses; the other makes the faculty as a whole responsible for the skills competence of graduates. The first method provides development for all students in a course regardless of their level of competence; the second insures that all students reach a certain minimum competence before graduation. Central College travels both roads simultaneously, and so, I believe, can most institutions.

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[1]Research by Dr. Joyce Huizer of Central College shows reliable correlation between entering freshmens' evaluations of their reading skills, and their Nelson-Denny scores.

Responsibility for Skills Development in Courses

The first approach has been implemented at Central by the Skills Council asking departments to designate certain courses from their regular curriculum as "skills" courses in writing, reading, oral communication, or any combination of those areas. The idea is that if, say, 25% of our total course offerings are doing heavy work in basic skills, most students will float into one or several before they are through. Other institutions may lay their seines differently, but the principle is that one goes beyond general sermons about being fishers, and actually plans how to lay out the nets, identifying exactly which courses and teachers are responsible for emphasizing which skills.

To earn its special label, a "skills" course must fulfill three conditions: first, the course must include lots of practice and performance of the skill. Second, the teacher must give careful and detailed feedback to students on their skills performance, and provide as much actual instruction and help as possible, calling upon the labs and faculty resource persons for help. For example, the history teacher will write detailed comments about writing style on student papers, or discuss style in individual student conferences, or critique rough drafts as well as final papers. The sociology teacher in a reading "skills" class may use the CLOZE test to monitor the relationship between the class text and student reading

levels, or demonstrate and supervise proper reading of a portion of the text, or, with the help of one of our resource people in reading, may structure comprehension exercises based on the class text. In a psychology class which emphasizes oral communication, the student might receive careful analysis of contributions to class discussion or of presentations before the class. Third, the teacher provides a formal evaluation of the skills each student commands by the end of the course. A student may receive a course grade of "C" which reflects both content mastery and facility of expression, but the teacher will also assign the student a code number in each skills area. That code is not recorded on the permanent transcript, but is sent to the skills center where it becomes part of the student's file and is forwarded to the student's academic advisor.

I know you're asking, why should Professor Bandstra volunteer her "Issues in Biology" course as a "skills" course? Why should she put out extra effort to learn how to evaluate reading comprehension problems or comment in detail about a student's writing style? There are no simple answers, but one helpful step is for the educational system to reward "skills" teachers. For example, make "skills" courses smaller, provide recognition or reduced loads for "skills" faculty, or lend research support to faculty who are developing expertise in the teaching of skills in content area courses.

Faculty can perhaps be stroked and rewarded into volunteering to teach "skills" courses. But what makes students elect such courses? When I last year volunteered a course as a "skills" course, and required seven papers instead of the usual three, many students were appreciative, but some wrote comments like, "This was supposed to be a course in literature, but Mrs. Fassler made it into a nightmare!" And who voluntarily enrolls in "Nightmare 101"? Central College's answer to this problem is to refrain from identifying "skills" courses in any publication handed to students. Advisors have lists which they use to counsel students, but otherwise students are expected to regard "skills" courses as kin to rainy days--they may spoil the picnic, but they are unavoidable and it must be admitted that they do alot of good. Our goal is to enlist students' understanding and loyalty in what we're trying to do, and to have so many "skills" courses that Mrs. Fassler's nightmare doesn't seem so unusual.

One could, unlike Central, formally label the "skills" courses, and then perhaps give special recognition on the student's transcript for successful completion of "skills" courses, a mark which could be helpful in applying for employment or graduate school. Or just haul in the sledgehammer and make one or more "skills" courses required for graduation. Or require of all graduates a certain skills proficiency, for which "skills" courses are a useful preparation or an acceptable substitute.

Responsibility for Skills Proficiency of Students

A second way in which formal responsibility for skills may be shouldered by the entire faculty is to ask the faculty to make sure that students under their care command certain basic communication skills before graduation. An institution may delegate this task to the English department or some other isolated sub-culture, which may administer a standard test to every student, but at Central we have chosen to involve all faculty. We delegate this task to departments, each of which is responsible for certifying that, before graduation, each of its majors possesses the minimum reading, writing and oral communication skills necessary to function adequately in that field. With the help of the Skills Council and of experts in the skills areas, each department determines what standards apply for that discipline and how students shall demonstrate competence. Interdepartmental discussions make departments aware of what others are doing and encourage some unanimity (or at least discourage wild eccentricity). Published statements by each department inform students what is expected of them. When Helen, as a sophomore, applies for a history major, the department immediately constructs her skills profile, using the initial codes assigned her as a freshman, plus later test scores, evaluations from her teachers, coding from any "skills" courses she has had, and in some cases a departmental test. If it appears that Helen may be deficient

in the basic skills needed for that discipline, she is informed in writing, and given specific guidelines and goals for remediation. She might for example be asked to pass a fundamental composition course with a grade of "C" or better; she might work in the oral skills lab until its director can certify that she has reached a certain level of competence; she might have to take the history department's course "Europe in the Modern Age" in which Professor Skeer makes damned sure that anyone who passes has demonstrated competence in the gamut of basic skills necessary to historians. Nearly all deficient students will, in such a system, either be helped toward competence or advised into other fields; last-semester refusals of certification should be rare. When a department does refuse endorsement, the graduation of that student is not automatically denied at Central, but is thrown open to the action of our elected student-faculty Credits Committee, which decides these and other sticky wickets of the same ilk.

Granted there are plenty of problems in this system, and since it is so new at Central, we've not completely worked out the bugs; however our hope is that to make departments responsible for certifying the skills proficiency of their majors is an effective way to get every department to face and to participate in the institution-wide effort to improve students' skills. We also hope to beat the impersonality, the cultural biases, and the

rigidity of standardized tests administered in a bleak assembly hall some cold Saturday morning and graded by machines or strangers; in our program, the student is instead evaluated by a group of teachers in his own discipline, who have observed his capabilities in various situations over a period of time. We also hope to tap the considerable excitement and motivation students bring to their major field, and to make the basic skills more obviously relevant to them by saying, not "to graduate from Central you must pass this test or this course," but instead, "to be a biologist you will need certain kinds of basic skills, and before you can graduate as a biology major, you must show our biology faculty that you possess those skills." Which makes it of course encumbent upon the biology faculty to know what skills are necessary to biologists, how those skills may be measured, and how they may be developed. Which sends those biology teachers back to the support system for training, resources, suggestions and information. So the two systems--support and responsibility--intertwine. Though other institutions may clothe them in different colors, the basic principles which have emerged from the program at Central may prove helpful to a wide variety of schools attempting to involve their entire faculties in the effort to improve students' proficiency in reading, writing and oral communication.